

THE FOUR PILLARS OF HOLISTIC DEFENSE

While recognizing that holistic defense is practiced along a spectrum, the following core principles, or pillars, underlie and form the foundation of any successful holistic defense practice:

1. Seamless access to services that meet clients' legal and social support needs.

Holistic defense begins with a commitment to addressing clients' most pressing legal and social support needs. Because the universe of these needs will vary from community to community, a holistic defender office must begin by identifying the full range of client needs. This can be accomplished in part by assessing the needs of the community from which their current and future clients come. For example, some communities struggle with immigration issues whereas others with family law or housing issues. Far from being a one-size-fits-all approach, holistic defense aims to address those issues that most commonly contribute to its clients' involvement in the criminal justice system. Holistic defense also seeks to address the effects of criminal justice involvement -- sometimes called collateral consequences, although far too often anything but "collateral".

Beyond simply offering these services, whether in-house, through a series of partnerships with social service agencies, or through a combination of both, holistic defense requires "seamlessness" in the way clients are represented. For a holistic defender, helping a client to access immigration representation, time with a social worker, or assistance with a public assistance application becomes as easy as walking over to another advocate. There is no complex intake or eligibility process to be repeated when guiding a client to other services or advocates, thereby relieving the client of the burden of having to retell her story while enduring yet another exhausting intake process. If there is administrative complexity, it is borne by the holistic defender, not by the client in need of help.

2. Dynamic, interdisciplinary communication.

Thee holistic defense client will likely have several advocates: a team of criminal defense and civil lawyers, as well as social workers or other social service advocates. What is fundamental to the practice of holistic defense is not so much that there is an interdisciplinary team, but that the team's culture is one of open, frequent, and meaningful communication. Communication in holistic defense is characterized less by hierarchy and referrals and more by a dynamic and interdisciplinary exchange of ideas and information. Holistic defenders are well-informed not just about their clients' criminal cases but also about their clients' progress in their work with their other advocates. Regardless of whether the issue being handled is motion practice in a drug sale case, assistance with a public housing application, or getting treatment for a long-time drug problem, the advocates are always well-informed as to all the other moving

parts of a client's relationship with the office. Just as importantly, each of those advocates – the social worker and the civil legal advocate – are in independent communication with each other – and not just communicating through the criminal defense lawyer. The result is a team of people all of whom are well-informed about a client's needs and progress. The client, in turn, sees himself as being represented by a team of dedicated advocates all of whom are in communication with each other, rather than by a single advocate who grasps only part of the big picture that is the client's life.

3. Advocates with an interdisciplinary skill set.

The bedrock of a holistic defender office is a passionate staff committed to providing the highest-quality representation. But beyond the zealous advocacy of the committed public defender, a holistic defender must be willing to develop and enhance a specific set of skills that is both client-centered and interdisciplinary. While perhaps a first step, this means more than criminal defense lawyers learning about what it is that social workers do. Rather, holistic defense encourages criminal defense lawyers to represent their clients in ways that actually support the social work needs of their clients and, in turn, encourages social workers to work with their clients in ways that support positive legal outcomes for their clients. For example, lawyers may learn how to identify mental illness and social workers may be trained in screening clients for potential immigration issues. In this way, each member of the staff of a holistic defender office ends up with a skill set fundamentally different than that of their colleagues in more traditional settings.

4. A robust understanding of, and connection to, the community served.

At its core, holistic defense entails cultivating a robust understanding of, and connection to, the community served. This practice derives from the realization that the advocate who is better able to relate to her client because she has spent time in his neighborhood and with members of his community will be more likely to provide authentic and effective representation. The lawyer who can leverage this community understanding will be more likely to achieve better legal outcomes. Similarly, the advocate who can speak from experience to a judge in a civil matter or to a counselor or administrator of a social service agency about the client's neighborhood or school will be a more persuasive and effective advocate. On a broader level, community engagement helps the holistic defender office to earn the respect and trust of the community which, among its many benefits, helps build a community-based network of support services for clients, their families, and neighborhoods. Furthermore, enhanced community engagement sheds light on client needs, which guide decisions about how best to allocate resources.